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ABSTRACT

Much can be gained by providing preschool children opportunities to work on projects. Projects invite children's participation at various developmental levels; strengthen their capacity and disposition for involvement in work requiring sustained effort; and are ideal for mixed age, ability, or linguistic groups. Teachers have a central role to play in stimulating and suggesting projects as well as in organizing the flow of work and assignment of tasks. Several dimensions, reflected by the following questions, should be considered in project planning: Is the central topic or feature vivid to children? Are opportunities provided for a small group to act out roles? Can new elements be added? Do children have sufficient interest and experience to enable them to "get inside" roles and act them out with feeling? Is the project locally and culturally salient? Is the project reasonably feasible, given particulars of setting, space, and available materials? Finally, is the topic and associated learning really worthwhile? In addition to the ways project work makes developmental sense, such activities also make cultural sense, enabling children to come to grips with their culture by rebuilding it and acting out the many roles they see around them. (RH)

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Project Work in the Preschool Curriculum

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In addition to the learning derived from the play activities, materials and equipment traditionally provided for children in preschools, much can be gained also from opportunities to work on projects. A project typically includes the reconstruction or reproduction of a number of elements in the children's own environments and experiences which the children use for taking on and acting out various roles associated with them. For example, one project began with the children using scrap materials, real tools, paints, and so forth to construct a large brick lorry or cement truck needed to 'deliver' bricks made from egg cartons used in the construction of the walls of a building. To this was added a small hut in which the workmen put their lunch pails, clothes and crash helmets. Numerous other details the children derived from close observation of a construction site near their nursery school were added. Another group of four year oldsmade a hospital ward with two simple beds, various equipment for examining, feeding, washing and treating patients. Using scrap wood, boxes and paint the children then built an ambulance and made a stretcher with which to move patients to and from the house , ambulance and hospital. These projects were several weeks in the making, and a few more in use. In such projects the chidren work together in small fairly stable groups, some children staying with the project throughout its construction and use, others participating only sporadically.

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The introduction of project work is based on the assumption that it is educative for young children to reconstruct salient and interest-worthy aspects of their own environments and experiences , and that through such reconstructive activities they learn more about and come to understand more fully some of the phenomena and events around them. In addition, the projects provide opportunities for children to work together, cooperating in the planning, fact-gathering, procurement of materials, and implementation of their plans.

Projects also invite children to contribute to the group's efforts on many different levels so that not all of them have to be at the same cognitive, social, perceptual, motor-coordination or verbal levels of development. Each child can participate in whays he or she is ready to. Project work is also ideal for mixed age, ability or linguistic groups in which more sophisticated members can assume responsibility for helping less sophisticated ones, and in which the latter can see the former as models for their own developing skills and knowledge. Another major value of project work is that it engages young children in sustained work over a period of time, thus strengthening their capacities and dispositions to become absorbed, involved and interested in work that requires follow-through, continuous effort through the routine aspects of the project and commitment.

The Teacher's Role

Teachers have a central role in encouraging, stimulating and suggesting projects as well as organizing the flow of work and

assignment of tasks. In some cases the teacher can encourage the children to undertake a project related to one or several children's spontaneously expressed interests. For example the hospital project mentioned above was constructed in response to a child's desire to 'talk about his operation', having recently had a tonsilectomy. In the other example, the teacher wanted to stimulate the children's thinking and expand their knowledge about construction in relation to a building being erected near the school. The teacher thus encouraged the chidren to observe the different kinds of workers, what implements and machinery they used, the special clothes they wore, the materials they used, and other elements required for their work. Sometimes a teacher wants to alert children to various so-called community helpers such as policemen. In such a case the chidren can observe policemen in their various roles, their behavior, their uniforms, equipment, vehicles, implements, weapons, buildings and so forth. The children can then be encouraged to build police vehicles, devise a uniform, put traffic markers in their playground, construct a jail, direct traffic and so forth.

Children who are not accustomed to project work may need to be assigned to specific parts of the construction work. Thus the teacher might ask three or four of them to work on the police car or jeep, a few others to devise and make uniforms for the police force , still others to preparing the white lines, zebra stripes, speed breaker and other traffic control elements, others can be assigned to constructing a jail, and so forth. Once the children become accustomed to this way of cooperative planning and working they will volunteer to work on various parts of the project, and will increasingly contribute rich

ideas and suggestions for elaborations and extensions of the elements to be included in the projects.

What Makes a Good Project?

Several different dimensions should be taken into account in deciding which projects are likely to be productive ones. Although there are no guarantees of success and inevitably some will fall short of our expectations, consideration of the following dimensions may help minimize disappointments.

1. Vividness: Is the central topic or feature of the proposed project vivid to the children?

Those children within a class likely to be planning and carrying out the project should have sufficient first hand experience, contact, exposure or opportunities to observe the phenomena of interest to be able to visualize or imagine its, what the real objects look like, what the real role players do and say, how they dress, what implements they use and so forth. A project about deep sea diving might be too difficult for desert-living children to visualize, and thus to plan and implement. If children have had little direct contact with a phenomenon likely to be difficult for them to contribute ideas and suggestions about what should go into the project and how it can be extended and elaborated. In such cases the teacher has to do most of the thinking and planning instead of simply helping the cildren from the sidelines.

2. Action:Does the proposed project provide sufficient opportuntities for a group (at least half a dozen) to act out roles as well as to participate in construction? Does the project have action potential?

Preschoolers are particularly responsive to things that move, that make animated gestures, characteristic sounds and others things that can be acted out and dramatized. A project for preschoolers should include elements that relate to each other, role players that have to interact in dramatic relationships. The emphasis should be on relational concepts rather than analytical ones. For example, concepts about what people give to each other, do to and say to each other, how things go from here to there, what carries what to where, what is used with or for what, who makes what out of what, and so forth. Concepts like circles, squares and triangles are analytic and abstract and have little functional meaning for preschoolers.

3. Elaboration: Does the project topic allow possibilities for elaboration? Can new elements be added into it?
The topic that starts with the policeman has many potential extensions (as indicated above). Following construction of the police vehicles, uniforms, traffic signs, jail, etc. such other elements could be added as the use of walkie-talkies, a 'mounted police force', police marching band, and so forth.

4. Interest

Do the children have enough interest and experience to enable them to really get inside the roles and act them out "with feeling", so to

speak? The project work in preschools is not for exhibition, but for use. The primary uses are action and interaction. The construction part of the project provides opportunities for children to interact with each other and with their teacher about the work, the plans, the tasks, the materials, the real things they are trying to reconstruct, the progress they are making, the things to add, what will work, what colors to paint, signs to make and so forth. As it takes shape it should enable role playing such that the children can really 'get inside' what they think it feels like to be the driver of the bus, or the ambulance, the director of traffic, or the jail warden, etc., and can put their minds to acting like persons in those roles. Unless these roles interest them and they have had sufficient opportunity to observe or otherwise learn about the real players, the project may fall flat.

5. Cultural Relevance

Is the proposed project locally and culturally salient? This question is similar to those above in that it emphasizes the importance of the children's own first hand experience in their own environments. Not every project has to meet this criterion, though the younger the children, the more important a criterion it is. However, one group of preschoolers constructed a very large dinosaur in their school corridor - an object they never encountered in their own neighborhood! It was however a favourite topic in stories and television programs. The children seemed beguiled by its monstrous proportions and mysterious movemets. It was a reconstruction of their fantasies - and maybe fears- suggested by vivid imagery in books and on the screen. Their play with it, once it was constructed, was minimal and

relatively unproductive. But their involvement in its construction was eager and enthusiastic. They also attracted much interest and comment fom children in other classes and adults who passed by. Such interest and attention encourages children to recount what that did and how they did it and to articulate their own thinking.

6. Feasiblity:Is the proposed project reasonably feasible, given the setting, space and availability of materials?

If children are not yet accustomed to doing project work, it is best to start with easily built units that take little time to realize . A few failures likely to occur with more complex projects are alright after a solid history of successes. The teacher has to make the best guess she can as to the potential complexities of a proposed project and postpone those she judges to be too far ahead of the children's competence and beyond what can be achieved with the available resources.

7. Value:Is the topic and the learning likely to be associated with really worthwhile? Are the learnings worthwhile at this age?

These questions apply to all activities in the preschool. Though they are not easy questions to answer, they are raised frequently in order to minimize the apparently natural tendency to ritualize the preschool curriculum and activities, and in order to increase the chances that they activities provided are relevant to the children. We do not offer all of the potential activities to children, but select those we think are most worth having, most useful, most

educative, most meaningful and culturally and developmentally appropriate to the particular children in our care.

Conclusion

Project work in the preschool makes developmental sense in that it provides opportunities for children to act upon, interact with and interact about their own environments. It makes cognitive sense since these actions and interactions strengthen and improve their understandings of them. It makes sense in terms of language and social development since it provides rich content for verbal interaction and taking on the roles of significant adults around him, for cooperative work among the children, each child encouraged to contribute in accordance with what he is able to. Project work also makes financial sense since it can be carried out mostly with scrap or waste materials and requires only a very small budget for tools and some paint and glue, etc. Project work also makes cultural sense: it is intended to help children to come to grips with their own culture by rebuilding it and acting out the many roles they see around them.

*This paper was prepared while the first author was Fulbright Visiting Professor at the M. S. University of Baroda, College of Home Science, Department of Child Development. 1983.